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Interview

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Abstract

Jeanne Delbaere interviewed Jack Hodgins in Nanaimo, Vancouver Island, on 7 September 1987.

write poetry
on their beaches
get burned
in their sun
trying to escape
for a fun holiday
on an 'off-season'
package deal
watching a group
of local workers
doing your job
in another country
for less than
the minimum

Jack Hodgins

INTERVIEW

Jeanne Delbaere interviewed Jack Hodgins in Nanaimo, Vancouver Island, on 7 September 1987.

Jack, we are here in the Bookstore on Bastion Street in Nanaimo where The Honorary Patron *will be launched in a few days. Is it the novel you read from at the Vienna conference in 1983?*

No, that one didn't work. I had been working on it since 1981. It had started as a story but had quickly developed into something much bigger. I even tried to turn it into a play but somehow it didn't come off. At the time of the Vienna conference I abandoned it for a while to work on a

new idea. Then I went back to it but came to the point when I had to admit that it would never click into place. So I gave it up and put it on a shelf.

For later use?

Who knows?

This, then, explains the six-year gap that has puzzled so many of your readers. When and how did The Honorary Patron *begin?*

It started as a visual image immediately after Vienna in 1983. I was sitting in a roof-top café in Zürich and had the vision of an elderly gentleman waiting anxiously for somebody. It was the sort of image that does not leave you alone until you have done something with it. I went home and wrote a quick first sketch of the man who — though I didn't know it yet — was to become the honorary patron of my new novel. The next spring I was invited to a new theatre festival in Nanaimo. An important personage — someone from the House of Lords — had been invited from London to be the festival's honorary patron. I tried to

imagine what it must be like for someone used to London literary circles to find himself suddenly confronted with the theatricals of a little town on Vancouver Island. I then remembered my elderly gentleman on the Zürich roof-top café and I had my story: he would be the honorary guest, a retired Canadian scholar brought back to his native place by his childhood sweetheart, now a cultivated woman in charge of the organisation of the festival.

So, in a sense, it was a trip to Europe that triggered it all? Do you make much use of the contrast between Europe and Canada in the novel?

Yes, I use the contrast between Europe and Nanaimo (though the place is not named in the novel), the shock it must be for this man used to the rich cultural life of Vienna and Zürich to come back after so many years to this wild place.

A 'wild place': that's how you see Nanaimo?

There is between me and this town a love-hate relationship which is not unlike the relationship between Crane and Blackie Blackstone in the novel. I taught high school here for seventeen years. When I was offered the creative writing course at the University of Victoria I was happy enough to go. Yet I often miss Nanaimo with its eccentrics, its colourful life, its marvellous variety. Zürich, because it is such a neat, tidy place, suggested to me a much more orderly existence, suitable for a man who'd lost interest in being involved in life.

In a sense, the return to Nanaimo means for your elderly professor a reactivation of memory, a new coming to terms with his real self.

Yes, and also a way of living his old age. He was fading into nothingness in Europe and he is suddenly forced into life again with of course all the complications which this entails. The town to which he is dragged back very much against his will is falling apart, not only because houses are in need of paint and repair but because some of them literally fall into the abandoned coalmines beneath the surface. This is actually happening here: now and then a house begins to sink because of the underground mine shafts. Likewise Crane falls into his past. The woman who brings him home, though she is about the same age, is more alive, she is full of projects.

Another wonderful female character like Maggie Kyle?

I've lived all my life surrounded by wonderful female characters. My life has been a parade of strong, energetic, tough, enthusiastic, accomplished women from my grandmother to my own daughter. I have known lots of Maggie Kyles and it was easy for me to turn them into fiction. But in *The Honorary Patron* I have created a woman character who is different from any of the previous ones. She teaches English in a high school, she is involved in the theatre festival: she is the first educated woman that I have dared to use as a character. I am rather proud of her. And find her very exciting.

Maggie Kyle had gone all the way to Europe to find her true self. Your honorary patron, asepticized and fossilized in Europe, must return to his native island to become alive again.

It is true, though I had not thought of that.

This search for a true self, an authentic voice, is a very typical post-colonial concern. Are you aware of yourself as a post-colonial writer?

I was not until I visited Australia and found out that people there were studying my work and calling it post-colonial. It came as a surprise to me but I like to hear that what I am trying to do is part of something larger. Certainly I have always been aware of the need to 'invent' a literature which can reflect life in this place, to use the English language in the particular way it is used here, to find ways of 'unlearning' the forms which were imposed upon us as inferior colonials who were expected to imitate the language and literature of the Old World and to create something new that says: 'This is us. This is how we are. This is how we name things and how we use the language and make it ours.'

The Invention of the World *was very typically post-colonial in its rejection of patriarchal and European myths and in its attempt to retrieve from oblivion or invisibility the true inhabitants of the land. Is there anything like that in* The Honorary Patron?

At one point in the novel there is a dinner party at which people have an argument about the extent to which culture must necessarily grow out of your own story and not the story of others. The argument comes about

because one of the plays is based on fictionalized local history. I think that we should encourage the production of a culture of our own even if it should happen to be inferior by European standards. I do admire Europe but Europe is Europe and here is here. We must find our own voice.

You use the plural: is it a general feeling here?

I doubt it. The people I write about are not very interested in literature. Here is the paradox: I am a bookish person yet I'm convinced that a genuine literature must somehow come out of those people who are not bookish at all.

You mentioned the love-hate relationship between Crane and Blackie Blackstone. Does it also stand for the tension between art and life?

I suppose this is a very central tension in the book. Blackie is the former bully of the school; he has become very rich and successful, an unscrupulous capitalist who runs the town. Because Crane has been in Europe and has made himself successful in that way he regards him as his equal and invites him to his log cabin on a lake. They almost fall into friendship again but it turns out that Blackie had taken the art critic for an artist and had wanted him to paint a mural for him. He felt that because he was wealthy he could buy culture. When he hears the truth he breaks into one of his terrible fits of anger. He does not understand all the fuss about someone who has not done anything. The artist is seen as irrelevant and foreign and frivolous. Blackie Blackstone raises another problem for me. I know he is despicable: he is unscrupulous, beats his wife, raises terrorists. Yet he is so full of life that he may even steal the show and be found more attractive than Jeffrey Crane. I'm worried about the moral confusion that this may lead to but at the same time I cannot help making the most of him and liking him for being so full of life.

You are an artist, not a preacher.

You think it's none of my business? No, it *is* my business, to be responsible for what I do.

I haven't asked you anything about the form of your novel?

It is quite conventional. At least it begins in a European conventional style that gradually breaks down as the protagonist becomes more and

more involved in Vancouver Island life, that is, in the chaos and disorder of life itself. Towards the end it becomes metafictional when the third-person narration is interrupted at regular intervals by a conversation off stage between Crane and Franz, one of his friends in Zürich. They comment on the book's events while these events continue to unfold so that the reader may ask himself whether everything did not take place in the professor's head. It also leaves the future open.

At least there is *a future.*

Crane will keep going. He is no longer dead.

What about you? What are your projects for the near future?

I have a children's book coming out in the New Year. I must still find a title for it. Then there is the historical novel on which I am currently working. It is set in Victoria, San Francisco, Australia and England — a very different book from *The Honorary Patron.*

Will it bear any trace of your recent visit to Australia?

I think so. For me Australia was an extraordinary country because nothing, absolutely nothing was familiar: every flower, every tree, every animal had an exotic unfamiliar name. Here's post-colonialism! This was the English language yet I had to learn all these new names and they seemed exotic, rich, evocative, exciting. They belonged to that place — to those people. There is a scene in the novel in which a woman feels she is being strangled by a dense lush forest of unfamiliar names.

Back to magic realism then?

I don't know but for me Australia *was* magic and I suppose the magic will come out somewhere. Home is usually magic for me too. But that is another story.